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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 000061

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS, NSC FOR WALTON

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/10/2020

TAGS: PGOV PREL KDEM TH

SUBJECT: THAILAND: PM ABHISIT TAKES A STAND, FORCES DEPUTY
MINISTER TO RESIGN

REF: BANGKOK 46 (CABINET RESHUFFLE)

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Classified By: POL Counselor George P. Kent, reasons 1.4 (b, d)

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

¶1. (C) Deputy Public Health Minister Manit Nopamornbodi tendered his resignation January 10 in the wake of a scandal involving planned procurement irregularities that already cost the Health Minister his job (reftel). The resignation represented a sharp about face for both Manit and his political patrons in the coalition Phumjai Thai party, as just last week Manit -- and the party -- had insisted he would not step down from the post, setting up a showdown with PM Abhisit, who demanded Manit resign. After the show of their defiance, Abhisit gave Manit and Phumjai Thai a deadline, and they caved.

¶2. (C) Comment: One of the knocks against Thai PM Abhisit's first year in office has been, ironically, that he's a nice guy -- perhaps too nice for Thai politics. A year on, he may be finding more spine, taking on a key coalition ally months after a personnel showdown with the Crown Prince over the Police Chief nomination. Most pundits -- and several insiders we talked to January 11 -- hailed PM Abhisit's decision to force Manit's resignation. Despite the Thai tradition of coalition cabinet personnel moves generally remaining the provenance of the coalition party rather than the Prime Minister, Abhisit took a stand for his leadership and the government's governance record in the face of corruption allegations when it became apparent that Phumjai Thai intended to try and ride out the controversy involving Manit. While the PM may have ruffled some feathers in Phumjai Thai, a key Phumjai Thai insider spoke to us January 11 with newfound respect for Abhisit. He will almost certainly gain public credibility by going toe to toe with Phumjai Thai and demonstrating leadership often missing in ¶2009. End Summary and Comment.

CONTRAST IN POLITICAL STYLES

13. (C) The contrast between the manner in which the ruling Democrat party and coalition partner Phumjai Thai initially chose to deal with the aftermath of the Public Health Ministry scandal could not have been more clear, nor more representative of the operating political norms of the two parties. The controversy involved alleged mismanagement of 86 billion baht in the Thai Khemkhaeng ("Thailand: Investing from Strength to Strength") program; a rural doctor activist had blown the whistle on the planned procurement irregularities before they actually occurred. PM Abhisit and the Democrat party reacted to the controversy almost immediately by moving into damage control mode and compelling Public Health Minister Witthaya Kaewparadai (a Democrat) to announce his resignation (Witthaya was subsequently named Parliamentary whip for the party). Abhisit's reputation as a clean reformer has been a central component of his political persona, and the decision to replace Witthaya was seen as a no-brainer.

14. (C) Phumjai Thai, on the other hand, greeted the controversy with what amounted to a collective shrug, publicly vowing that Manit would stay in place as the Deputy Minister unless he was formally found guilty of wrong doing. The decision to stand pat and keep Manit in as Deputy -- despite credible accusations of intended corruption -- not only highlighted the Phumjai Thai party's well-documented reputation for playing fast and loose with the rules, but also represented a public challenge to the PM, one in a series over the past year. The subsequent media coverage of PM Abhisit even in traditionally sympathetic quarters quickly turned negative, portraying the PM as unable to bring Phumjai

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Thai to heel.

ABHISIT SAYS: "OFF WITH HIS HEAD" - AND GAINS RESPECT

15. (C) In the end, the PM answered his critics when he publicly announced that he would not allow Manit to remain a member of the cabinet, apparently calculating that Phumjai Thai would not jeopardize the entire coalition simply over his intervention with one isolated cabinet position, particularly one belonging to the Matchima faction within Phumjai Thai not directly affiliated with party godfather Newin Chidchob. Phumjai Thai spokesman and Newin lieutenant Supachai Jaisamut suggested to us January 11 that the PM's calculation was accurate, telling us that the party was effectively powerless in the face of the PM's decision and would have to accept Manit's sacking and "move on."

16. (C) Supachai also told us that his decision to confront Phumjai Thai over Manit may have yielded him some begrudging respect from his coalition partners. Supachai and others in Phumjai Thai have consistently derided PM Abhisit as "soft" and "weak," but even Supachai had to admit Abhisit had shown his mettle by locking horns with Phumjai Thai, telling us that Abhisit had "grown" into his role as PM.

17. (C) Privy Councilor Siddhi Savetsila similarly told Ambassador and PolCouns January 11 that Abhisit needed to demonstrate more decisive resolve as PM in 2010, for the sake of the country. The Manit sacking was a good start, using the power of the PM job to ride herd on the fractious coalition, but Siddhi said he had recently told Abhisit's father, Siddhi's long-time personal physician, that many other "tough" decisions were necessary for the national interest. Siddhi mentioned Abhisit's indirect stare-down of the Crown Prince over the selection of police chief in late 2009, but stated that now was the time for Abhisit to make his candidate, Acting Police Chief Prathee, the permanent chief.

JOHN